DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 600 CS 009 594

AUTHOR Fagan, William T.
TITLE Understanding Whole Language as Philosophy and Methodology: A Case of Reductive Bias?
PUB DATE Oct 87
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Transmountain Regional Conference of the International Reading Association (8th, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, September 30-October 4, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Philosophy; Primary Education; *Reading Instruction; Teacher Education; *Teacher Responsibility; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Child Centered Education; *Whole Language Approach

ABSTRACT

Whole Language has become a visible and strong movement in language instruction. Yet there is still considerable disagreement as to what Whole Language entails and there are different degrees of knowledge held by various self-professed Whole Language teachers. Some are at a beginning stage of knowledge regarding Whole Language as philosophy and methodology. This has serious implications for the children entrusted to them. Teachers of whole language should have attained an advanced level of knowledge. Seven biases that may interfere with the attainment of knowledge at this level are: (1) oversimplification and overregularization; (2) overreliance on a single basis for mental representation; (3) overreliance on top-down processing; (4) context-independent conceptual representation; (5) overreliance on precompiled knowledge structures; (6) rigid compartmentalization of knowledge; and (7) passive transmission of knowledge. (Eighteen references are attached.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED305600

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
William Fagan
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Understanding Whole Language as Philosophy and Methodology: A Case of Reductive Bias?

William T. Fagan, Ph.D.
Professor of Education, and Director
Reading and Language Center
The University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta, T6G 2G5

CS009594

Understanding Whole Language as Philosophy and Methodology: A Case of Reductive Bias?

Abstract

Whole Language has become a visible and strong movement in language instruction. Yet there is still considerable disagreement as to what Whole Language entails and there are different degrees of knowledge held by various self-professed Whole Language teachers. Some are at a beginning stage of knowledge regarding Whole Language as philosophy and methodology. This has serious implications for the children entrusted to them. In this paper, the author maintains that teachers of Whole Language should have attained an advanced level of knowledge and following on the work of Spiro and others, discusses seven biases which may interfere with the attainment of knowledge at this level.

Understanding Whole Language as Philosophy and Methodology: A Case of Reductive Bias?

There are as many definitions as there are individuals who claim that they are "Whole Language educators". The term "educators" is used because people,other than teachers (publishers, consultants, professors) identify with Whole Language. To synthesize the many views on what Whole Language is would be an impossible task. However, from readings on Whole Language and on the basis of interactions with respected professionals, one point seems to characterize Whole Language and that is that it is a perception of how language is learned, an orientation, or even a philosophy. Goodman (1986) says that "it is a way of bringing together a view of language, a view of learning and a view of people, in particular two special groups of people: kids and teachers" (p. 5). Rich (1985) also stresses that Whole Language is more an attitude of mind that a set of methods.

However, Whole Language cannot be separated from methodology or at least action as Whole Language teachers do not just possess a philosophy or a frame of mind, they also translate ideas held into learning experiences for children. The quality of these learning experiences is best understood in terms of the completeness, consistency, and understanding of Whole Language as philosophy.

Whole Language as Methodology

Rich's (1986) list of what Whole Language is and is not, is more experience directed than theory directed. In summary, Whole Language is and is not as follows:

Whole Language is:	Whole Language is not:
Language is kept whole	Phonics taught in isolation
Child-centered	Teacher-centered
Literature based	Vocabulary controlled, syntax controlled, high interest
Context rich	
Writing rich	Context deprived
Talk focussed	A focus on form over content
Activity based	Quiet
Parent involved	Work sheets
Self-esteem building	Isolated from community
Corporate, small group and individual teaching/ learning situations	Self-esteem damaging Every class taught in the same way every day
Fun	Boring
Hard work	Easy

Observations of Whole Language teachers (Anderson, 1987) indicate other common and more specific practices: shared or cooperative reading of predictable books, copying and completing sentence patterns (I see a _____), and

completion of minimal cues exercises (T_ _ e _ _ _ _ _ _ _ i _ b _ _).

Methodological Inconsiderateness

While a rose by any other name may smell as sweet, many beliefs and practices by the name of Whole Language may not. Unfortunately, Whole Language has become a bandwagon, a "hype"; to profess that one is not a Whole Language teacher is to invite scorn, to be considered outdated, and even ineffective. Many programs that claim to be Whole Language based are actually cases of the emperor's new clothes, while many other programs and practices are as theoretically sound as Whole Language in its ultimate form will ever be, yet the label Whole Language may not be used.

Why is the methodology employed in Whole Language classrooms often inconsiderate? The answer is that the methodology reflects the state of the Whole Language theory, belief system or philosophy which in itself may be inconsiderate or not fully developed. While teachers are sometimes referred to as "beginning Whole Language" teachers, this begs the argument that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" and raises the question of whether it is ethical for a teacher to implement a Whole Language program with a little understanding of what Whole Language is without consultative assistance. The implementation of any school curriculum should not reflect a beginning knowledge but a level of advanced knowledge. Spiro, Coulson, Feltovich

and Anderson (1988) maintain that in beginning or introductory knowledge, "the goal is often mere exposure to content and the establishment of a general orientation to a field. . . . At some point in learning about a knowledge domain the goal must change; at some point (learners) must 'get it right'. The learner must attain a deeper understanding of content material, reason with it, and apply it flexibly in diverse contexts" (p. 2). They further maintain that one of the major obstacles to advanced learning, nor surprisingly, is the complexity of the material to be learned, the flexibility that is necessary in order to vary the application of knowledge according to diverse and changing conditions. If Goodman (1986) and Rich (1985) are right that Whole Language is firstly, a philosophy, a belief system, and attitude, then Spiro et al.'s conditions for advanced learning apply to developing competency in understanding Whole Language.

Spiro et al. maintain that failure to attain advanced knowledge in an area is often due to "the general tendency to reduce important aspects of complexity" - the reductive bias (p. 3). They indicate seven forms of such bias. While their examples are drawn from the medical field, their biases are also applicable in understanding the less than adequate grasp which some teachers have of Whole Language and consequently the translation of their conceptualizations of Whole Language into meaningful and effective practices.

Reductive Biases in Understanding Whole Language

Oversimplification and overregularization

The relationship of wholes and parts. Goodman (1986) in What's Whole in Whole Language stresses the significance of meaning as providing the unity or wholeness in learning. No one would disagree with the centrality of meaning. But what is meaning and for whom is something meaningful? Is it meaningful for a child to "participate" in the discussion of a novel but who cannot recognize many words and so cannot read it independently? Is it meaningful for a child to guess what the teacher intends in a minimal cues message? Is it meaningful if a child becomes fascinated with the relationship of letters, letter combinations and sounds, and requests the teacher ad infinitum to tell which sounds go with which letters? At a recent Conference on literacy, two presenters began their session by explaining what Whole Language was. First a letter (of the alphabet) was written on the overhead and one presenter asked, "Is this Whole Language?" After pause time, she responded "This is not Whole Language." Next a word, then a phrase, and a sentence were written with the same question and the same response. Language Experience was then mentioned and the presenter said "Maybe not. We'll decide later." It was eventually decided that Language Experience was not Whole Language. Finally a story was produced and it was decided that this was Whole Language.

Meaningfulness cannot be defined in terms of a unit of language; it must take into account the interrelationships between units of language and learners. If a teacher puts the word "OUCH" on the board and asks for instances when this expression would be used, it this not meaningful? And if a teacher should read or have the children read a story, even a long story, and ask 10 or 15 questions about the content, is this meaningful? Morris (1985) who investigated the questioning strategies of Whole Language and non-Whole Language teachers found this to be the case. Over one-half of the questions used by both groups were mainly for "testing" the children's knowledge of what they had read. Morris' and Fagan's (1987) explanation for these results was "that these teachers had been exposed to and had adopted a number of whole language principles for which they had not yet had sufficient input in terms of content and critical analysis to develop control over their orientation so that it automatically translated into effective classroom practice" (p. 82).

Some Whole Language teachers have a phobia about teaching phonics because they believe that phonics is parts. But the issue is nor parts versus wholes, but the relationship of parts to wholes and vice versa. Goodman (1970) has contributed significantly to our understanding of the reading process by his conceptualization of three cueing systems underlying that process - semantic, syntactic, and

graphophonic. A good reader utilizes all three cueing systems during the act of reading. Minimal cues exercises, if presented properly, (with sufficient content) are actually designed to teach phonics.

Whole language is literature and theme based. If the child's life is the whole, then children's literature and trade books have an important place in a language curriculum - but only a place. Are children who are fascinated by stories in "basal readers" (not the contrived questioning or teacher intervention that often accompanies teaching via them) aberrant in their behavior? Similarly, themes can serve as a focus or unity for many language activities. But does a program have to be theme based to be Whole Language? If the school curriculum is to consist of a wide range of reading and writing materials and opportunities, then there is only a place for themes. Sometimes themes are contrived in that the teacher plans the themes for the year and often classes in succeeding years get the same themes because the resources are readily available. Should not themes grow out of student interest and provide an opportunity to relate reading and writing and oral language to problems or situations within the children's lives?

The writing process is structured linearly as planning, composing, and revising/editing. The belief that children initially engage in expressive writing (Britton, 1970) and write in narrative form (Moffet,1968) has been refuted by

Coe (1988) and Newkirk (1989). Allen (1988) has shown that "Writing development is not a stair-stepped sequence. Rather, children become more flexible in their use of an increasing number of literacy strategies" (p. 9). In fact, children may even regress at times, or employ new strategies simultaneously with the old. Crowhurst (1986) has shown that revision/editing is not a predetermined part of the writing process for all writers. She believes that good writers operate within a cost effectiveness factor and will only consider redrafting if the stakes are sufficiently high. She further believes that if teachers demand the writing cycle of plan, compose, and revise/edit, they may lose their credibility with some writers.

Overreliance on a Single Basis for Mental Representation

Whole language is child-centered. This is often understood to mean that all language activities originate with and revolve around the child. Some educators even go so far as to say that all that teachers need to know about language can be learned from watching children. This is a serious indictment on teacher education programs which teachers usually have attended for four years, and questions the intelligence of teachers who ignore prior knowledge and experiences as factors in learning. There is no doubt that teachers do and should learn a lot from children, but hopefully, they already possess meaningful frameworks within which to synthesize, evaluate, and hypothesize regarding the

input. Another common parameter of child-centered is that the child is actively involved - activity frequently being defined from a physical (movement, talking) or affective, as opposed to cognitive involvement.

If a child-centered philosophy of learning originates and is controlled by the child, then the corollary is that non-learning is also child-centered. Ryan (1976) in Blaming the Victim, has very strong words for teachers who focus only on the child. He says, "They fight to the death any proposals that implies that there might be anything wrong with their teaching" (p. 36). Child-centered must not leave teachers on the periphery. If a teacher does not show a child how to use the three cueing systems in reading, for example, who is to blame?

Focussing on the child may also be shortsighted if a child is seen as "at risk" because he/she comes from an environment that did not promote a familiarity with books and instill a value for the importance of reading and writing. Allen (1988) claims that rather than children being at risk, schools are at risk if they fail to teach children and use the children's environmental backgrounds as an excuse for not doing so. Certainly, knowing the sociocultural, political, economic, and moral contexts of a child's life provides a broader understanding of the child, and the influence of such contexts must be understood in terms of their pervasiveness (much beyond the family unit)

so that the problem is not seen as a child with a deficit.

Whole language is English language specific. If Whole Language is a philosophy about language learning, then it should transcend languages just as philosophies about religion or politics or recreation transcend languages. A Conference labelled Whole Language rejected a proposal on Whole Language in French immersion classes because there wasn't a perceived need for information on Whole Language in French immersion classes.

Overreliance on Top-Down Processing

Preserving the wholeness. Because of the concerns with wholes, language sessions are often approached in a global manner. As indicated earlier in this paper, since activity is often the thing, moving from wholes to parts is taboo. Consequently, children often do not get taught specific knowledge, skills, and strategies which they need in order to become good readers and writers.

Modelling behavior. Within a Whole Language philosophy it is important that teachers model appropriate language behavior. For example, if there is a silent reading period, teachers should read. If there is writing for sharing, then teachers should write and share. This makes much sense. However, how is Whole Language teachers' modelling of writing compatible with their belief that spelling is not important in writing? Children in the upper elementary and even junior high grades often engage considerably in using

invented spelling. It seems that in some Whole Language classrooms, an assumption is that all writers are beginning writers regardless of the grade level. What do misspellings in a written text mean in terms of the child's imaging a model of writing? How do they relate to the forms of words in texts which children read? Are some children confused over two sets of images or models? Certainly, meaning or content is the overriding focus of writing, just as it is in reading, but how does a teacher explain to a child that misspellings do not matter when they interfere with reading what has been written and the construction of meaning, even by the writer him/herself? Perhaps, for very young children and with some pieces of writing the child and the teacher may have different roles - thinkers, and doers. The children do the thinking - the construction of meaning - and the teacher does the shaping so that it looks like the writing in books. If done in the right spirit and in cooperation with the child and with an understanding of how reading and writing relate, the role of the teacher should not be seen as constraining or as a threat.

Context-Independent Conceptual Representation

Meaning beyond the classroom: the greater whole. Are reading and writing when confined to the context of the school, whole? If school is considered the totality of language use, then the answer is yes, but if reading and writing are viewed as integral to a child's life, then

reading and writing in school is only part of a whole. Yet many Whole Language classrooms base their language curriculum solely on children's literature and trade books and focus it around themes. Children also read and write notes, and lists, and they read comics and labels and menus and read and make posters. Learning cannot be context bound. As Cochran-Smith (1984) has shown, even very young children use language for a wide variety of purposes across various contexts.

Overreliance on Precompiled Knowledge Structures

Commercially packaging whole language material. Whole Language programs are being marketed by all major educational publishing houses. However, the distribution of commercial Whole Language programs leads to other problems. Goodman (1986) states "Whole language can't be packaged into a kit or bound between the covers of textbooks or workbooks. It certainly can't be scripted. . . . Teachers must reach their own informed professional decisions. They - with the kids - create whole language classrooms" (p. 63).

The Lower Mainland IRA Council in British Columbia in its Newsletter of the Fall of 1986 commented on a Whole Language Conference held earlier that year. The editor stated, "One interesting observation was that many of the sessions' presenters were representatives of publishing companies. It seems that the 'whole language' philosophy is becoming 'basalized'". It is not uncommon at conferences to

see publishers' displays include "rigid" sets of materials for implementing a Whole Language program - even cards with single words or minimal cues - all at a handsome price.

Once materials are packaged, especially information that can more easily be written on chalkboards or charts by the teacher, there is a danger of teachers following and relying on such materials as recipes.

Rigid Compartmentalization of Knowledge

Process and product. Spiro et al. elaborate on this bias, "Components of knowledge that are in fact interdependent are treated as being separable from each other. Learners develop mistaken beliefs in the independence of the components" (p. 4). Some Whole Language teachers maintain that process is the thing. This relates to their belief that Whole Language is completely child-centered and children are actively involved. It is seen in teachers who focus on meaning and content in writing to the detriment of correct spelling, even though misspellings may interfere with sharing the writing. Product is a fact of life. Life is filled with occasions of reckoning since people are constantly being "tested" against certain demands or standards. This is not to suggest that "testing" (in the formal sense of the word) should become dominant within schools, but children must realize there are standards (products) in language, and school is the specific agency in society to help children meet them.

Passive Transmission of Knowledge

Direct teaching. There is no doubt that children learn a lot by being involved in situations. However, there are tasks for the completion of which, particular strategies are needed. Derry and Murphy (1986) define learning strategies as "the collection of mental tactics employed by an individual in a particular learning situation to facilitate acquisition of knowledge or skills" (p. 2). Such strategies are best provided through "direct teaching" which Roehler, Duffy, and Meloth (1984) argue is an integral part of classroom teaching. Strategy development through direct teaching cannot be left to chance, that is, acquired passively. Derry and Murphy maintain that such learning "is not likely to result from anything less that a thoughtful systematic curriculum that complements direct training in learning strategies, and thereby 'engineers' the gradual evolution of important executive control skills" (p. 1).

Within Whole Language classrooms the development of reading rather than of writing is more likely to be assumed to occur passively. Some Whole Language teachers are of the belief that competency in writing implies competency in reading. There is no doubt that competency in writing facilitates competency in reading and vice versa, but as Rosenblatt (1988) clearly points out, the nature of the reading done in writing is not similar to the kind of reading done in reading. There is not complete transfer

across language modes. According to Roehler, Duffy, and Meloth (1984), in order to become independent, readers must know how to arrive at the what.

Implications

In an area of the curriculum as crucial as helping children develop competency in oral and written language, teachers should be at an advanced stage of knowledge acquisition. The onus for the acquisition of this stage of knowledge is perhaps greater for Whole Language teachers since Whole Language has produced a sort of aura, a connotation of the mystique. The claim to be a Whole Language teacher is almost like claiming immunity from any reflection on the teacher as being a factor in a child's failing to learn. Rich (1986) expresses it this way. "Saying 'I do whole language' tends to give the impression that one should humbly kneel before the philosophy of whole language as a lofty ideal. There is something fundamentally wrong with the idea of paying homage to the Process as if it were an untouchable, unchanging shrine. Such reverence inhibits growth. . . " (p. 1).

It is perhaps unfortunate that the label Whole Language, rather than a more generic term such as "good teaching" was ever coined. It is in fact ironic that while Whole Language teachers are very much against labelling for children, they readily accept a label for themselves. However, as long as teachers call themselves Whole Language

teachers they have an obligation to reach an advanced stage of knowledge of Whole Language philosophy/methodology. Many agencies or sources have roles in assisting them in arriving at an advanced stage of knowledge. Teacher education programs, inservice programs, within-system consultants, conferences, professional reading all play significant roles in conjunction with the teachers' own classroom observations and thinking. Reaching an advanced stage of knowledge is dependent on the individual having an open mind and the opportunity to hear the pros and cons. Conference goers (Whole Language teachers not excepted) sometimes sit in a session for two minutes or less and leave because the speaker does not support what they already believe. Rich (1986) states that Whole Language teachers who reach the level of advanced knowledge are "professionals". She describes them further. "They read, question, the theories 'out there', question personal assumptions about learning and begin to develop personal theories about the way in which learning goes" (p. 4).

References

Allan, J. (1988). Literacy development in whole language kindergartens (Technical Report #436). Champaign, IL: Center for the Study of Reading.

Anderson, J. (1987). Cognitive and social interactions in shared big book experiences. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Britton, J. (1970). Language and learning. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.

Cochran-Smith, M. (1984). The making of a reader. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Crowhurst, M. (1986). Revision strategies at three grade levels. English Quarterly, 19, 216-226.

Derry, S.J., & Murphy, D.A. (1986). Designing systems that train learning ability. Review of Educational Research, 56, 1-39.

Goodman, K.S. (1970). Reading: A psycholinguistic guessing game. In H. Singer & R.B. Ruddell (Eds.), Theoretical models and processes of reading. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Goodman, K.S. (1986). What's whole in whole language? Richmond Hill, ON: Scholastic Publications.

Moffet, J. (1968). Teaching the universe of discourse. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Morris, R.H. (1985). The nature of teachers' questionning and theoretical orientations to reading in grade five classrooms. Unpublished master's thesis, The University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Morris, R.H., & Fagan, W.T. (1987). The relationship between questionning behavior and theoretical orientation to reading comprehension. Reading-Canada-Lecture, 5, 76-83.

Newkirk, T. (1989). More than stories: The range of children's writing. Don Mills, ON: Irwin.

Rich, S. (1985). Whole language: The inner dimension. English Quarterly, 18, 15-22.

Rich, S. (1986). Whole language - A quick checklist. Whole Language Newsletter, 4, 4-5.

Roehler, L.R., Duffy, G.G., & Meloth, M.B. (1984). What to be direct about in reading: Content-only versus process-into-content. In T.E. Raphael (Ed.), The contexts of school based literacy. New York: Random House.

Roseblatt, L.M. (1988). Writing and reading: The transactional theory (Technical Report #416). Champaign, IL: Center for the Study of Reading.

Ryan, W. (1976). Blaming the victim. New York: Vintage Books.

Spiro, R.J., Coulson, R.L., Feltovich, P.J., & Anderson, D.K. (1988). Cognitive flexibility theory: Advanced knowledge acquisition in ill-structured domains (Technical Report #441). Champaign, IL: Center for the Study of Reading.